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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP HIGHLIGHTS INCREASINGLY STRONG USG ENGAGEMENT WITH COLOMBIA'S CARIBBEAN COAST

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) On August 25, the Ambassador gave the opening address to the tenth annual Fulbright conference on hemispheric relations at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla. He also inaugurated a U.S. Department of Commerce-sponsored corporate good governance program and met with leaders of the Caribbean region's government, private sector and Afro-Colombian community. END SUMMARY.

AMBASSADOR AFFIRMS STRENGTH OF BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

¶2. (U) The Ambassador traveled on August 25 to Barranquilla to give the opening address to the tenth annual Catedra Fulbright-Universidad del Norte conference. The conference, covered live by local and national media, showcased the extensive collaboration between U.S. and Colombian academics that Fulbright Colombia facilitates throughout the country. Fulbright Colombia Director Ann Mason highlighted Fulbright's efforts to expand its presence in Colombia beyond the major cities from which it has historically drawn most of its scholars. She noted that for the first time the Caribbean is one of the best represented regions among Fulbright's recently awarded grantees. Fulbright Colombia's total number of scholarships has increased by 80% in the last five years and its Colombian participants are increasingly from diverse regions and socio-economic backgrounds. In his remarks, Universidad del Norte Rector Jesus Ferro Bayona praised USG support for academic exchanges as critical to the U.S.-Colombia bilateral relationship and to hemispheric relations in general.

¶3. (U) The Ambassador addressed an audience of approximately 250 Colombian and U.S. academics and students. His remarks focused on how Secretary of State Clinton's vision of a new architecture of diplomacy will affect the U.S.-Colombia bilateral relationship. He emphasized the strong relationship between the United States and Colombia is based on shared national goals that transcend changes in administrations. He also affirmed continued U.S. support for Colombia's fight against terrorism, for resolution to the internal armed conflict and for passage of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), pending the resolution of labor and human rights issues. He concluded by noting that despite the global economic crisis, poverty in Colombia is at a record low and foreign trade and investment are at record highs.

AMCHAM BARRANQUILLA PROMOTES CORPORATE GOOD GOVERNANCE

¶4. (U) The Ambassador presided over the opening of the U.S. Department of Commerce-sponsored corporate good governance program at AmCham Barranquilla. In his remarks to an audience of approximately 60 business and government leaders, including Atlantico Governor Eduardo Verano, the Ambassador emphasized the importance of ethics and transparency in both business and

governmental activities, and of attracting investment by promoting a positive environment for business. Guests voiced concerns about the perceived lack of progress of the FTA and whether it will pass under the current U.S. Congress.

CARIBBEAN AFRO-COLOMBIANS SEEK GREATER U.S. SUPPORT

¶15. (SBU) The Ambassador met at the Barranquilla Binational Center (BNC) with nine leaders of the Caribbean Afro-Colombian communities to discuss the impact of current USG programs geared towards them. The participants represented departmental (state) and local governments, as well as non-governmental organizations from four departments. The Ambassador and the participants agreed that although USG, Colombian and private initiatives have helped development, the approximately 1.4 million Afro-Colombians on the Caribbean coast continue to suffer from poverty, poor education, limited access to public services, and lack of political representation.

¶16. (SBU) The participants cited various impediments to economic development including insufficient political organization and representation, persistent and institutionalized racial discrimination and lack of land titles. The region's growing tourism and real estate industries are putting competing demands on land to which Afro-Colombians claim an ancestral right. Colombian law provides for collective land titling to Afro-Colombian communities. Under these provisions, over five million hectares have already been collectively titled to the Afro-Colombian communities on Colombia's Pacific coast. Some participants expressed frustration over what they believe to be an unbalanced focus by Colombian and foreign government assistance on the needs of Afro-Colombians in the Pacific region.

¶17. (SBU) The Ambassador encouraged the meeting's participants to seek partnerships with AmCham Barranquilla and the BNC for entrepreneurial and business training and educational programs. Many of the participants noted that weak entrepreneurial skills and limited commercialization of their products are problems that training could help resolve. The Afro-Colombian communities' lack of access to credit, capital, and domestic and international markets also hinders economic development. They believe that with better training and access, their communities would be well poised to take advantage of the eventual passage of the FTA, which they expect to benefit the Caribbean region significantly.

EMBASSY-SUPPORTED SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS EXPAND

¶18. (U) Also at the BNC, the Ambassador announced the expansion of the Department of State-funded "College Horizons" scholarship program for outstanding, economically disadvantaged high school students. The College Horizons program has already served 50 Afro-Colombian students since 2007 in Tumaco and Buenaventura. The Ambassador urged the Afro-Colombian leaders to promote College Horizons and the BNC's other targeted scholarship programs within their communities. He encouraged them to continue to share feedback on USG programs with their Embassy contacts.

BROAD POSITIVE PRESS COVERAGE

¶19. (U) Press coverage of the visit was extensive and very positive. Almost all events were open to the press and included a press gaggle with the Ambassador. Resulting coverage included stories in leading national and regional papers, TV and radio. There were 15 media placements in all. Among these were 2 articles in Colombia's second leading national newspaper, El Espectador (576,400 daily readers) titled "U.S. Support" and "10 Years of Catedra Fulbright." RCN Radio's website (12 million avg. mthly hits) ran a story titled, "U.S. Ambassador Opens Catedra Fulbright in Uninorte University." La Libertad (Barranquilla local paper) ran a front page story with the headline, "Support to Colombia Stands Firm" referring to the United States' long-standing support to Colombia. Telecaribe (Caribbean regional TV channel, est. 550,000 viewers) covered the Ambassador presenting an award to Colombian Police Commander Colonel

Henry Rubio for his outstanding service as the Deputy Director of Diplomatic Protection. Fulbright Colombia contacts reported that they were very pleased with the media coverage of the conference.

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